

H. Palmer Hall

Father Buddha

I walked two clicks down Le Loi Street
to a school yard, a buddha broken in the dust
shattered by a rocket meant for us,
and saw you sitting in his hand
tossing carved pieces of the statue's feet,
not even caring where they'd land.

What mattered was that I did not want to be
where and what I was and saw
that you had also had no choice. Some law,
legal in my case, chance in yours,
with no way out that you or I could see,
gave me a twelve-month, you a lifetime, tour.

We shared a cigarette and watched the smoke
rise into the red dust Pleiku air.
You grinned, blew smoke rings with the flair
that comes only when you're very young.
You told me I was on the Buddha's throat
and should beware the Buddha's tongue.

I remember that once, when the war was calm,
we laughed and played with shattered stone,
and know there can be no way to atone
for all the death, the wounds, the pain.
If you still live, rest quietly in Father Buddha's palm;
if not, sleep peacefully with all the dead.

Russian Roulette

—*imitations of fantasy (for the names on the Wall)*

They thought a little game might be nice—
An American version of Russian Roulette,
but no bullets in a pistol, only a wire-
mesh barrel, revolving slowly, filled
with ping-pong balls, tumbling, rolling,
every 30 seconds another ball falls out,
birthdates professionally printed, falling
into numbered slots.

Like the Texas
lottery, only you win, you lose, and the only
thing you bet's your life. That's how
the game works. Only, they forgot
the props. The big-bosomed woman
in the red, white and blue bikini. She
was supposed to smile for the cameras,
read out the numbers could she count
that high. That high: 1,2,3, . . .120
should have been okay. 120, you don't
have to go, can have a party, celebrate,
drink beer, smoke grass, tell the government
to blow it out its ass, moon them all.

And they forgot to have a winner there,
like NBA draft day, lined up to grin
and walk up on the stage. A real
killing for #1: all-expense-paid vacation
to the mysterious East, exotic women,
big game hunting. They could have plastered
that on the walls, found a way to make
the day appeal to everyone, perhaps even
the players.

But it was a government
party: no props, no bimbos, just
a turning barrel, wire mesh, a voice
(perhaps Georgie Jessel's?) calling
numbers, one by one, winners and
losers.

The Sentinel Trees

Morning, bright sun and warmth, the beginning of a new century
 But “dying” seems the one right word. We sit in the back yard,
 Tall loblolly pines looking on, whispering to each other
 As the wind picks up and the so long dead come back to visit.

Earlier at the first hint of approaching sunlight, I
 Ventured out beneath the trees, pushed
 Back the thick undergrowth that separates the lawn from
 All that wonderment of persimmon, palmetto, mustang grapes

And ventured down to a perfect lake of green algae,
 Cypress knees, water tupelos, a small overhang just
 A few feet above the swirls of green, below tall
 Cypress trees standing alone, guarding snakes

And armadillos, lamenting, perhaps, their own dead,
 At the base of the forest slope, and wetting their roots
 In the shallow water leading to the slow moving river.
 And there, I mourned my dead from an old war

Left over from a time when I was young. I see
 Their names on the black gash on a tourist mall,
 See their faces in the stagnant, teeming with life,
 Water that sits quietly beside tall trees. Jesus God,

Watch over them, I pray, before turning back
 To Adirondack chairs to talk of other days, people I do
 Not know but who make up the generations of my life.
 My aunt, whose husband died just three weeks ago

Today, joins us, fresh tears added to the old. “When
 A man and a woman have been married 54 years,”
 She says, “God should let them go out together
 Instead of leaving one behind to weep.”

A long century, adding up to you and me,
To tall trees that speak of us and all who went
Before, to still waters with green molds washing
the base of everything we can see.

H. Palmer Hall's most recent book is *Deep Thicket & Still Waters*. His recent poems have appeared in *Best Texas Writing 2*, *Ascent*, *Concho River Review*, and *Rattle*. "Father Buddha" was originally published in *The Practice of Peace* (Sherman Asher Publishing, 1998).